Fingerpicking

Fingerpicking is the use of one's fingers to strike or pluck the strings instead of using a pick (plectrum). This technique is widely used in classical, flamenco, Spanish and folk music; however, it has also been used in nearly every genre of music - including pop and rock. Fingerpicking allows the player to be more selective regarding what strings should sound when playing the guitar polyphonically (multiple simultaneous notes).

For example, if I want to play an E minor chord, but don't want the fourth and fifth strings to sound, I would either need to mute them or just not play them at all. If I were strumming the guitar, you can see how playing the same chord without the fourth and fifth strings might be awkward.

However, with the use of fingerpicking I can pick strings 1, 2, 3 and 6 easily. That's a very simple explanation of the myriad of possibilities that only fingerpicking will allow. Fingerpicking also has its own distinctive sound.

When reading music that uses fingerpicking, you may see the term "PIMA" or the initials P, I, M or A used. PIMA is an acrostic for the thumb and the first three fingers of the right hand. Because of its length, the pinky is often times not used. PIMA is often utilized to indicate which fingers to use in picking. The traditional Spanish words that we derive those letters from are:

Pulgar = Thumb

Indice = Fore Finger

Medio = Middle Finger

Anular = Ring Finger

I know! I don't speak Spanish either. It's certainly a lovely language, but we need something else to help us remember the fingers. Here's how to think about them.

For P, think of the guitar pick - or if you're in the UK, they call it a plectrum. A lot of beginning guitar players will use their thumb instead of a pick. Got it?

- For I, think of the index finger
- For M, think of the middle finger

- For A, think of the anniversary (ring) finger

Fingerpicking, like any other technique that we are going to study, requires practice, attention and a lot of patience. This is a technique that feels awkward at first and too, with time and discipline, miraculously gets easier. If the definition of an arpeggio is a broken chord or a chord where the notes are played independently of each other, then you are about to play a lot of arpeggios.

Until you get more comfortable with the fingerpicking hand playing the prescribed patterns, it's extremely important that you focus all of your attention on the fingerpicking and not the fretting. For this exact reason, I want you to start this process by playing an open E minor chord, on strings 1, 2, 3 and 6 only. We won't be playing strings 4 and 5, which are the only strings that you would be fretting for our traditional E minor chord.

So, let your fretting hand relax. You won't be using it to start off here. Now with your fingerpicking hand, place your thumb (P) on the sixth string, your ring finger (A) on the first string, your middle finger (M) on the second string and your first finger (I) on the third string.

Now, just rest your fingers there for a moment. I want you to indelibly (forever etched in your mind) picture how your fingers are sitting on the strings. Remember this one concept and fingerpicking will almost never be an issue for you. How your fingers are sitting on the strings is the basis of 99% of the fingerpicking that you will encounter. Don't take your fingers off the strings just yet!!!!

Now, notice the two headings on the fingerpicking exercise page follow this description: "Songs in 4" and "Songs in 6".

The first example under "Songs in 4" says PIMA. That means if the song count is 1, 2, 3, 4, you would pick P, I, M, A, or thumb, index, middle, ring. You get it? I knew you would... you're smart like that. Once you get this basic feel down, work your way down the list. This may take 5 minutes or it may take an hour. There is no crime in over practicing. It will only make you more ninja-like!

So the next exercise would be P, I, A, M, and so on. Practice each exercise for a few minutes. This will assure that you have a good feel before moving to the next exercise. When you're done with that list, move over to the next list to the right, where you will find finger combinations. When you see two finger letters underneath a beat, that means that both of those fingers should be played simultaneously (at the same time). On the 3rd list to the right we have more of the same, only this time the thumb shares in the combination pick. This is what is referred to as a pinch-pick. It is called a pinch-pick because the motion looks much like a pinch if executed properly.

When you come to this list, this section will make more sense.

Fingerpicking can be done in any time signature. *However*, 4/4 and 6/8 are by far the most common. In fact, they will make up the majority of the songs that you encounter. To get you started, I have included 28 exercise patterns. Granted, some of these patterns you will never use, but many of them you will.

As an exceptional guitarist, however, we want to be versatile! Practicing **all the patterns** will not only develop your dexterity in regards to fingerpicking, but it will also get you to start "thinking outside of the box" and coming up with your own patterns. Depending on the genre of music, picking with your nails is preferred over not having nails and playing with your fingertips.

Classical, Spanish and flamenco styles almost always require the use of fingernails while country "chicken pickin'" sounds better when you don't have nails. YOU are the artist here. You get to choose what best suits you. Be open and experiment with some different styles to see what you're most comfortable with.

Fingerpicking Exercises - Songs in 4

1	2	3	4
P	I	M	A
P	I	A	M
P	M	I	A
P	M	A	I
P	A	M	I
P	A	I	M

1	2	3	4
P	M A	P	M A
P	I M	P	I M
P	I A	P	I A
P	M A	P	I M
P	I M	P	M A
P	I M A	P	I M A

1	2	3	4
P A	M	I	M
P I	M	A	M
P M	I	A	I
P M	I	P A	I
P A	I	P M	I
P I	M	I	A

Fingerpicking Exercises - Songs in 6

1	2	3	4	5	6
P	I	M	A	M	I
P	M	I	A	M	I
P	M	A	M	I	M
P	I	A	M	A	M
P	M	A	M	I	M
P	A	M	I	M	I
P	A	I	M	I	M

1	2	3	4	5	6
P	I M A	I M A	P	I M A	I M A
P	I M	I M	P	M A	M A
P	I A	I A	P	I M	I M